

## ***A Relational Key***

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, December 19, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 7:10–16

Here's a riddle to start us off this morning: What is one thing that is necessary for every social relationship we know that takes time to develop and, if broken, is hard to mend? Did you get it? The answer – trust.

Let me share a true story of this issue as it played itself out in my relationship with my last parish, First Lutheran in Ellicott City, Maryland. I was called there in 1985 with the expectation that I would give pastoral leadership to a major building program. The good folks of First Lutheran needed to build a new worship space, and, with it, a new narthex, choir room, office complex and expanded parking lot. When I got there, preliminary plans called for the building of all of that in two phases, over a three-year period of time, at a cost of \$1.1 million.

After meeting with the Building Committee over the first several months, it became clear to me that doing it in two phases was not good stewardship of time, money or effort. So, I proposed that we do the whole shebang in one effort – saving money, as building costs continued to rise yearly, as well as saving effort and disruption to program, as we would do all the displacement necessary to get the building completed in one time frame, not two.

For all the right reasons doing it all at once made a lot of sense to me. So, after six months on the job, I proposed we go to the congregation and change their thinking of a two-phase building plan to a once-and-done deal. I argued persuasively that for all the right reasons, that is what we should do.

But here was the problem. I hadn't been there long enough for them to trust me. So, my proposal was soundly defeated at a Congregational Meeting and we ended up doing it in two phases over an eleven-year period with a total cost of triple the original plans. With all my good reasons thoroughly explained, the new proposal couldn't carry the day, because I hadn't been there long enough as their new pastor for them to trust my ideas, my thinking, my judgment, my pastoral advice.

I'll go on record by saying that I never once said "I told you so" after the meeting as the price tag kept climbing. It was their decision, made with their best prayers and deliberations. But the key to the whole enterprise was the trust, or lack of it, that was the underpinning of their decision process.

Do I need to point out that you are facing this issue as you anticipate calling a new Sr. Pastor? Studies have shown that it takes five to seven years for a pastor to gain the trust of a congregation, and some of us who have been at this a while will tell you that number is more like eight to ten years. Trust can take a long time to develop and needs a measure of patience on the part of a pastor.

But we can step outside of ecclesiastical circles, and broaden our discussion on trust as it relates to interpersonal relationship in various venues, and still have the same issues. We don't marry people we don't trust, or at least, we probably shouldn't. The willingness to trust develops over time as our partners show themselves to be trustworthy.

Our children grow to trust us – to be there; to take care of their needs; to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. Then, we learn to trust them, over time, with responsibilities and freedoms. Remember the first time you turned over the car keys to your first born for a solo adventure? There'd better be trust there. We trust that our children will be responsible citizens, drive according to the laws of the state or commonwealth, date someone who will treat them well, and hang out with friends who are also responsible human beings. It all hinges on trust.

Our employers learn to trust us to do our jobs; to be responsible employees; to fulfill our duties. And our colleagues learn to trust that we will be there for them.

And when trust is broken in any of these relationships – lying, cheating, unfaithfulness or deception – when trust is broken, the relationship gets damaged, sometimes beyond repair.

This issue of trust lay at the heart of the relationship between God and King Ahaz of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. We catch just a glimpse of it in our first lesson from the prophet, Isaiah. King Ahaz trusted more in political alliances, even ones dangerous to his Kingdom, more than he trusted the God of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. History has shown that he trusted more in his diplomatic relations with powerful neighbors than he did in the one true God.

The eleventh king of Judah, son of Jotham, he reigned from 735 to 719 B.C. The time of the writing in Isaiah that we read this morning was 734, as the armies of northern Israel and Syria were threatening to attack Judah. It was known as the Syro-Ephraimitic War. Assyria, that great power to the north and east, is threatening to swoop down and absorb all the countries in its wake. Syria and Ephraim, known to us as northern Israel, wanted to form an alliance with Judah to protect themselves, but Ahaz wanted no part of it. So, Syria and Ephraim planned to march against Judah and to depose Ahaz, so they could put a puppet king on the throne who would join their cause.

The word that is given to Ahaz through God's prophet is that if Ahaz will trust in the Lord, the Lord will preserve Ahaz's Davidic Kingdom and destroy the rulers of Israel and Syria. But Ahaz needs to believe that promise. He needs to trust.

So, I suppose the question is, how do we learn to trust? Well, one way is to look to the past. Has the other in the relationship been trustworthy? Have they been faithful to us? Have they demonstrated that they can be trusted?

The answer to Ahaz should have been a resounding, "Yes!" God has always been the faithful one in his relationship to his people. He brought them out of bondage in Egypt. He led them through the sea to escape. He guided them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. And he sent spokesman, prophets, who kept pointing the way, who kept proclaiming God's faithfulness.

But Ahaz didn't, or wouldn't, see it. So God promises to give him a sign – a child, whose name will be Immanuel, "God is with us."

Centuries later, we see the fulfillment of that promise in a child soon to be born in Bethlehem, as the chosen people of God, once more, sat in darkness, this time of Roman oppression, and called on God to save them. It is the Christian witness, through Matthew's Gospel, that the promise made centuries ago to an untrusting King, came to completion in a child who will be called Jesus.

And through that gift to the world, God demonstrates once more that his promises to his people are true and that we can trust those promises with our very lives. Martin Luther's 16<sup>th</sup> century definition of faith is "trusting in the promises to God."

From the moment of our baptisms, where God's Word and Water are combined, we hear the promise that as children of God, we will never be abandoned. God will be with us no matter where we go, what we do, what enemies may surround us, what depths or heights we might experience. As St. Paul reminded the Christian's in Rome at a time of religious persecution in the land: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God is always true to God's Word.

There is a story from World War II that can offer a visual image of this trust we know. During the Nazi blitz on London, a home was hit by a bomb. Everyone got out safely except for the young son of the couple who lived there. The house was burning. It was imperative that the young child get out of the home and into the safety of the street. The father, who could see the little one outlined in the window on the second floor, called out for him to jump. "But I can't see you daddy. I'm scared," the little boy cried. "It's okay, son," dad calls. "I can see you."

That may be the best image we have of the promise of Christmas. That is the promise containing all promises, that even in the darkest moments of our lives, in moments when we can't see our way and everything seems hopeless, God is there ready to carry us to safety and bring us into the new life that is waiting for all of us, as we trust, and let go, and fall into his arms.

As Frederick Buechner has so poetically stated it: "What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us and our snowbound, snow-blind longing for him."

So, go ahead this season. In the dark of Advent days, begin to let go of that which holds you back and weighs you down. Let go, for there is a God whom we can trust with our broken, hurting, bruised lives. Let go, he has promised to catch us.

AMEN.

Copyright © 2010, Glenn E. Ludwig. All rights reserved.